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SUBJECT: RARE ACCOUNT OF DPRK "TOTALLY CONTROLLED" PRISON  
CAMP

#### SUMMARY

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¶1. (SBU) A North Korean defector recounted his experience as a second-generation prisoner in a DPRK political prison camp. He described the public execution of his mother and brother; starvation; torture with hot coals; and an education system bereft of politics, history, or any reality outside of the camp boundaries. If his account is true, this defector would be the only person known to have been born in such a prison and escaped to describe it. END SUMMARY.

#### OVERVIEW OF DPRK PRISON SYSTEM

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¶2. (SBU) Shin Dong-hyuk said he was born on November 19, 1982, in Political Prison Camp No. 14, located in Kaechon, South Pyeongan province, North Korea. Camp No. 14 is one of six or seven sprawling political prison camps in the DPRK where prisoners -- along with up to three generations of their families -- are imprisoned and forced to work in slave-like conditions, usually for life. Some small sections of these camps, notably Camp No. 15 (Yodok) and Camp No. 18 (Bukchang), are designated as "revolutionizing" zones for prisoners with fixed terms of incarceration. Analysts estimate that up to 200,000 political prisoners are currently interned in the DPRK prison system.

¶3. (SBU) Until now, nearly all defector testimonies on the North Korean prison camp system have been from former prisoners who had been detained in the "revolutionizing" zone at Yodok, while accounts on the "totally controlled" areas were either hearsay or from the published testimonies of just two defectors, Ahn Myeong-cheol (a former guard at Camp Nos. 11, 13, 26 and 22) and Kim Yong (a former prisoner at Camp Nos. 14 and 18). Shin is the only witness claiming to have been born in a camp. We spoke to him on July 9.

#### BORN INTO A PRISON VILLAGE

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¶4. (SBU) Shin's earliest memories are of living with his mother in a two-room cement house in a village with similar residences. The family used one room for cooking and the other for sleeping. Shin said that residents could circulate freely within their village, but needed special permission from security guards to visit other villages or areas of the camp. (Note: Shin could not describe how many houses were on his street, how many people lived in his village, nor how many villages were within the camp. End note.). Armed guards

circulated in the camp, especially at night. The guards wore Kim Jong-il or Kim Il-sung badges, but at the time, Shin did not know who those people were. Shin's father lived with his work unit in a separate village.

¶5. (SBU) Shin did not know why his family was in the camp or what "sins" his parents had committed. While he now speculates that he had uncles who went to South Korea during the Korean War, he never thought it was necessary to ask his mother and his mother never explained. In fact, it was not until he was much older that he had any reason to believe that anyone outside the camp lived any differently.

#### ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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¶6. (SBU) Shin began to attend elementary school ("people's school," in North Korean vernacular) at the age of six. He was in a class of about 35 students in a school of five grades. The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, basic arithmetic, and the memorization of camp regulations, such as prohibitions against stealing, unauthorized movements and meeting in groups of three or four. There was no discussion of politics, history or current events. Shin never learned about South Korea, China, the United States, or even North Korea. Class discussion centered entirely on everyday life of the camp. For example, children would have to write descriptive information about their mothers bringing cabbages home.

¶7. (SBU) The children studied from 08:00 until 12:00, broke for a one-hour lunch, and then continued class until 15:00. They then went to work, with typical tasks including road construction, fixing potholes, collecting coal dust, or

carrying water to the fields.

#### WORKING FOR RATIONS AT AGE 11

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¶8. (SBU) At age 11, camp authorities transferred Shin from his mother's home to a dormitory where he lived with his classmates. His formal education then ended and his class became a full-time work team.

¶9. (SBU) The security guards distributed clothing, food and other necessities to camp inhabitants. They distributed new sets of clothes, winter and summer, to each resident every two years, and provided shoes twice a year. For food, Shin's mother received a daily family ration of 900 grams of corn, cut to the consistency of rice; salt soup and coal. Shin never ate white rice or meat, except for the occasional mouse that he was able to catch in the fields.

¶10. (SBU) Rations were directly linked to one's ability to meet work quotas. Food allotments were small -- his share as a work unit member was usually about 6 spoons of corn per meal -- but sufficient to stay alive. Shin said people only died of starvation when they could not meet their work quotas and, accordingly, were not given their rations. Without food, they would be too weak to meet their quota the next day and would again be deprived of rations. Eventually, these people would die.

¶11. (SBU) Shin did not recall any instances of teachers, supervisors, guards or even fellow inmates showing any compassion or offering to help anyone trapped in this cycle of missed quotas and starvation. Inhabitants were too concerned about their own survival. Moreover, it was assumed that death by starvation was the natural and proper fate for someone who could not do their work.

#### SWIFT PUNISHMENT, NO HEALTH CARE, ACCIDENTS COMMON

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¶12. (SBU) There was usually one security guard per work team. Thus, in a leather factory where Shin worked for a time, there was one guard for the roughly 2,000 workers. The

guards casually punished inmates for various infractions. In one instance, Shin dropped and broke a sewing machine table. The security guard in charge administered immediate punishment: he cut off the end of Shin's right forefinger. Shin considers himself lucky to have received such light punishment.

¶13. (SBU) Inhabitants did not generally seek health care because they would try to work regardless of their health. If they were too sick to work they could not meet their work quota, be unable to receive their rations, then die. Although there was a hospital in the camp, it was mainly for victims of industrial accidents. Camp inhabitants, he said, were often hurt in the coal mine, where tunnels regularly collapsed, and in the forests, where huge carts of wood injured or crushed the workers.

#### TORTURE AND CONFINEMENT

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¶14. (SBU) One morning when he was fourteen, guards blindfolded Shin and brought him to an interrogation center. They told him that his mother and brother had been caught trying to escape and asked Shin to confess his complicity with their plans. He denied any knowledge of the escape attempt.

¶15. (SBU) Guards bound Shin's feet and hung him upside down "for about a day," he said. The guards then took Shin down, chained his hands and feet together, and burnt his back with hot coals. The guards held his torso in place with a metal hook.

¶16. (SBU) The guards then put him in a windowless room, perhaps underground, for seven months. He had a roommate who claimed to have been there for ten years. Shin's food rations were cut from the normal six spoons of shaved corn per meal to only two or three.

#### PUBLIC EXECUTION OF MOTHER AND SIBLING

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¶17. (SBU) On November 29, 1996, guards brought Shin and his father, who had also been imprisoned for seven months, to the camp's execution yard. The yard was used two or three times a year to execute people for attempting to escape, stealing, or violating other camp regulations. Typically, the village residents, including children, would be forced to gather to watch. Song remembers being about five-years-old when he witnessed his first execution. He said he ran to the execution yard filled with curiosity.

¶18. (SBU) Shin thought that he and his father were about to die. Instead, the guards announced the imminent execution of Shin's mother and brother for attempting to escape the camp. Shin said that all public executions were preceded by long exhortations by prison authorities about the various sins committed by the condemned. With the villagers gathered, executioners hung Shin's mother, bound and gagged, from a tree. They kicked a stool out from under her feet and she died, Shin said coolly. Three soldiers then shot and killed Shin's brother, who was also bound and gagged. Asked how he felt about his mother, Shin said that he was angry that his mother had tried to escape. He would never forgive her for causing so much trouble for him and his father.

¶19. (SBU) Security guards then allowed Shin to rejoin his work unit. However, his team avoided him and treated him like a criminal. He said that he volunteered to work longer and harder in order to win back their trust. He felt guilty for the crimes of his mother and brother, he added.

#### ESCAPING THE GULAG

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¶20. (SBU) In 2004, Kim met a fellow inmate who had lived outside the camp and had even been to China. Based on his discussions with this inmate, Shin resolved to look for an

opportunity to escape. On January 2, 2005, Shin and his coworker were working in the woods gathering wood near the electrified barbed-wire perimeter of the camp. Not seeing any guards in the area, they decided to run through the fence. Shin wedged himself through the wires, suffering burns on his legs. He said that he did not know what happened to his coworker, who appeared to have been caught in the fence.

¶21. (SBU) Shin broke into vacant houses to steal food. He exchanged his light-blue prison clothes with regular clothing he found in abandoned buildings. As he traveled north to the Chinese border, Shin was able to blend in with crowds and avoid authorities along the way. "It's not like you have a sign on your forehead that says you grew up in a prison camp." Shin crossed the Tumen River after traveling about 25 days in North Korea.

¶22. (SBU) Shin spent about a year in China, farming and working at the house of a Chinese man in Yanbian for about nine months. He later traveled to Shanghai. In February 2006, a "Chosun Ilbo" newspaper reporter then working in China helped him enter the ROK Consulate in Shanghai. He arrived in South Korea six months later.

#### RESETTLEMENT IN THE ROK

¶23. (SBU) Shin's resettlement has not been easy. Shin told poloff that he was hospitalized after one month at the Hanawon Resettlement Center because he was having nightmares. For the time being, Shin has given up living alone in his ROKG-funded apartment and is staying at the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), a local NGO. Dr. Yoon Yeo-sang, President of NKDB, told poloff on a separate occasion that Shin still showed symptoms of mental instability and had difficulty in talking with other people. Indeed, during this interview Shin often seemed distant and disassociated from the events he was describing.

¶24. (SBU) Despite the difficulties of overcoming the trauma, Shin still wants his story to be known. He is currently working, with the assistance of an NGO, on a book for publication at the end of July. He is also trying to get a driver's license.

#### COMMENT

¶25. (SBU) Shin's testimony is almost impossible to verify. However, many experts within Seoul's DPRK human rights community seem convinced by his story, and we, too, note the general consistency between his account and what little we already know about the totally controlled areas of North Korea's prison system. END COMMENT.  
VERSHBOW